

Albemarle County Courthouse
Charlottesville
Albemarle County
Virginia

HABS No. VA-976

HABS
VA
2-CHAR,
2-

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

Addendum to
Albemarle County Courthouse
Court Square
Charlottesville
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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ALBEMARLE COUNTY COURTHOUSE

HABS No. VA-976

Location: E. half of Court Square (bordered by Jefferson, Park, High,
and 4th Streets, Charlottesville, Virginia

Present Owner: County of Albemarle

Present Occupant: Albemarle County Courts and Sherriff's Office

Present Use: Courthouse and Sherriff's office

Statement of
Significance: Built in 1803, the Georgian north portion
is typical of Virginia Courthouses of the
period. The 1859 south portion has seen
many revisions, but survives as an example
of Roman Revival Style. In its early days
the courthouse served as a community build-
ing, prompting Jefferson to call it "the
common temple."

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Albemarle County was dismembered from Goochland County by action of the Virginia Assembly in 1744, for the convenience of the residents of the upper Goochland area. Named for William Anne Keppel, Second Earl of Albemarle and contemporary royal Governor-General, the new county included the present areas of Fluvanna, Albemarle, Buckingham, Nelson, Amherst, parts of Appomattox and Campbell Counties.

To accomodate the inhabitants of the new county, a courthouse was built in Warren, about a mile west of present day Scottsville, a quarter of a mile from the James River.

In 1761, Buckingham and Amherst counties were separated from Albemarle, and thus Warren was no longer centrally located within the county. The decision was made to build a new courthouse in Milton, the next largest town in the county.

However, a one thousand tract of land owned by Colonel Richard Randolph of Henrico was purchased and administered by Dr. Thomas Walker of Castle Hill. Fifty acres of the land was established as a site for the courthouse, and land around it was laid out in a grid

plan, seven squares by four squares.

The Virginia Assembly of 1762 established a charter for this town to be named in honor of Princess Charlotte Sophia of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, wife of King George III. In the original charter it was stated that the town would be established for the reception of traders.

The original Albemarle County Courthouse was built in 1762, probably on the site of the present County Office Building on Court Square. Bad gaps in County records from 1748 through 1783, the result of a British raid, deny the existence of records of cost, dates of erection, or design of that original structure. In 1938, however, a janitor in the courthouse found a document dated November 13, 1762, between William Cabell and John Harvie, calling for a replica of the Henrico County Courthouse of the period. The building was apparently of shabby and temporary construction, for in 1803 it was decided that a new courthouse was needed.

Plans for the building were drawn by George Divers, William D. Meriwether and Isaac Miller, who along with Thomas Carth, William Wardlaw, and Thomas C. Fletcher solicited bids for the construction, not to exceed five thousand dollars.

The building was erected using brick bearing

walls and timber roof construction. A bell, bearing the words "Geo. Hedderty Founder Philadelphia 1809" was probably hung in the cupola during repairs on that portion of the structure in 1815. In 1807, iron bars were placed in the windows of the building's offices. Lightning rods, known as "Franklins" were installed for fire prevention in 1818 at a cost of fifty dollars for the iron, purchased from James Leitch, and seventy five dollars for installation by Jacob Wimer. The roof was covered with tin in 1825.

The first question of alteration to the courthouse came in 1849, when the possibility of adding a front with porch and columns was discussed. Nothing was done regarding this, however, until ten years later, when George W. Spooner was hired to construct a front addition according to the plans of William A. Pratt, a former proctor at the University of Virginia. The project cost nine thousand, four hundred dollars, and included flanking neo-gothic towers topped with gables, reminiscent of the Henrico County Courthouse.

This 1859 two story addition was apparently of questionable architectural heritage (Local Historian Bernard Chamberlain refers to it as "an architectural monstrosity") and after the War Between the States, the towers and gables were removed and replaced by Spooner with the existing portico in the Greek Revival Style.

Few alterations were made for several decades, with the exception of the moving of the bench and jury box from the west to the north (rear) wall in 1926. Then in 1938 a major renovation was undertaken by architects Milton Grigg and Floyd Johnson of Charlottesville. On the exterior, the newer portion was altered significantly. The yellow stucco was removed, exposing the red, Flemish bonded brick. New window frames and jack arches in the style of the 1803 portion were added. The interior balcony of the courtroom was altered. New wall and ceiling treatments, stairways, mechanical and electrical equipment were installed. A small addition was made on the northwest corner of the 1803 portion, in matching style, to house judges chambers.

Minor renovations, including a small addition to the 1938 addition, were made in 1963 by Johnson, Craven and Gibson of Charlottesville. At this time, the interior balcony was removed entirely.

The interior of the courthouse as it is today is unremarkable. Note only be made of three portraits hanging in the courtroom: copies of the Sully portrait of Jefferson, Vanderlyn's Madison and Rembrandt Peale's Monroe, all by Scaisbrook Abbott. Also of interest is the portrait of the second Earl of Albemarle, dressed in the uniform of the Coldstream Guards, which is hung in the vestibule.

Certainly a courthouse in a county which spawned two early American presidents has numerous legendary tales associated with it. In 1781, Charlottesville, then capitol of Virginia and home of Thomas Jefferson, was the subject of a raid by two hundred fifty British troops under Colonel Banastre Tarleton. Tarleton and his men rode through Louisa County, stopping briefly at Cuckoo, where they were spotted by Jack Jouett, of Albemarle County. Jouett rode speedily to Charlottesville, arriving shortly before the soldiers, to warn the legislators of the impending disaster. Although there is some speculation that the legislature may have met at Court Square's Swan Tavern (owned by Jouett's father), it is more likely that the courthouse served as the forum. The legislators retreated to Staunton and Jouett rode out to Monticello to warn Jefferson, the main object of Tarleton's raid. Thus the British made no captures in Charlottesville, and sought revenge by destroying all available court records of the period.

The Albemarle County Courthouse is the only courthouse in the United States which was regularly used by three American Presidents simultaneously. Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe and James Madison all frequented the courthouse in various capacities, as it served not only as a courthouse but a public assembly hall, voting place, and church. (Weekly

church use was rotated among denominations) Jefferson, who referred to it as "the common temple", visited it as a lawyer, magistrate and local citizen, Monroe served as a magistrate in 1799 and Madison was a president of the Albemarle Agricultural Society and a member of the University of Virginia's Board of Visitors, which met at the Courthouse until the completion of the Rotunda. There is no doubt but that these three men saw each other frequently at the courthouse, making it a unique building in the annals of history.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

1. Old Views: There is one view of the courthouse in the Holsinger Collection, Manuscripts Room, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. This shows the south elevation circa 1911.

Additional photographs are in the Albemarle County Hills Manuscripts Room.

An early twentieth century view of the South elevation is shown in vol 3, #1 "Jefferson's Country." p. 14, January, February 1970.

2. Bibliography

Burnley, W.S. The Court House of Albemarle County in Old Virginia. 1938.

Chamberlain, Bernard. "The Albemarle County Courthouse" in "The Magazine of Albemarle County History." 1962-63. p 65-70.

Rawlings, Mary. Ante Bellum Albemarle. 1935.

Woods, Edgar. Albemarle County in Virginia. C.J. Carrier, Co., Bridgewater, Va. 1901.

Work Projects Administration. Jefferson's Albemarle. 1941.

3. Interviews

Interview with Floyd Johnson, AIA, February 1976.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: With its Georgian north wing and its Classic Revival south wing, this is a typical example of an early to mid-nineteenth century Virginia courthouse.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Over-all dimensions: The building is two stories tall and T-shaped with the northern "stem" portion measuring about 40 feet by 57 feet and the southern "cross-bar" portion measuring about 18 feet by 72 feet.
2. Foundations: Stone in the 1803 northern portion; brick in the 1859 southern portion.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: Red brick laid in Flemish bond throughout both portions.
4. Structural system: Brick bearing walls with wood beams and joists, as well as some modern structural reinforcement.
5. Porches: The main (south) facade has a two-story high portico with a triangular pediment and four Ionic columns. The entablature has modillion bracketing and the tympanum is painted white. The peak of the portico's roof meets the peak of the building's roof.
6. Chimneys: There are two brick chimneys, one at each end of the southern portion of the building.

peak of one meeting the peak of the other.

The roof is slate and has no dormers.

b. Cupola: At the very center of the roof of the 1803 portion is a large octagonal cupola. Wood framed with eight louvered wood sides, the cupola has a bell shaped dome covered with copper. A simple weathervane sits at the very top. The cupola houses a bell manufactured in 1809.

9. Trim and other details: A cornice of modillion bracketing runs around the entire building at the roof line. Flanking the central second story window on the southern facade are two inscribed stone panels. The tablet on the right reads, " ALBEMARLE COUNTY Founded A.D. 1744 From a portion of Goochland County Named for the second Earl of Albemarle " The tablet on the left reads,

" COURTHOUSE First portion Built between 1763 and 1781 Added to in 1803 and 1860 Remodeled and restored 1938."

The information on the left tablet is incorrect; the present courthouse contains none of the 1763 building. That was completely demolished before the 1803 portion was built. The Albemarle Chapter of the D.A.R. inscribed the panels in 1938. All short flights of steps on the building's exterior have modern wrought iron railings.

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance on the south facade has a modern wood double door painted dark red. Above this door is a six pane by two pane window above which is a large stucco jack arch. There are two doors each on the east and west facades. They are all six-panelled, solid wood, and painted white. Except for the south door on the west facade, all the doors have four pane by two pane transoms above them. All of the doors have stucco jack arches.

b. Windows and shutters: The first and second stories of the 1859 portion and the first story of the 1803 portion have nine over nine light sash wooden double-hung windows. All of these windows have stucco jack arches. The frames of these windows vary slightly. The windows in the second story of the 1803 portion are wooden and double-hung with a six over six light sash. None of these windows have the stucco jack arches, but some of them do have brick lintels. Every window in the courthouse has wood louvered shutters painted very dark green.

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: Each wing has a gable, the

C. Description of Interior

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: Under the west half of the south portion is the building's only basement. It is accessible only from the outside and houses heating equipment.
- b. First floor: The main entrance on the south facade opens into a long lobby at the end of which is the District Court room. On the west side of the lobby in the southern portion is office of the Circuit Court judge. Opposite this office on the east side of the lobby is the county sheriff's office. Also off this lobby are rest rooms and the staircase.
- c. Second floor: Since the Circuit Court room is a two story high space, it takes up a great deal of the second floor. The western two thirds of the south portion belong to the County Court Room, while the eastern third is the office of the County Clerk. The stairway opens into a lobby roughly in the same position as the first floor lobby.
- d. Attic: None of the attic is finished. It houses ductwork.

2. Stairways: There is one modern steel stairway in the building of little architectural importance.

3. Flooring: Modern linoleum tiles with some hardwood.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Mostly painted plaster with some acoustical ceiling tile.
5. Doorways and doors: All interior doors are mid-ern wood colonial style panelled doors. The door frames are also of little architectural significance.
6. Trim: No trim survives from the building's early days. Except for the Circuit Court room there is no notable trim. The Circuit Court room has white painted wood colonial style mouldings and trim added during the 1938 restoration.
7. Hardware: Modern and insignificant.
8. Lighting: Modern fluorescent and incandescent light throughout. The Circuit Court room has modern colonial style brass chandeliers.
9. Heating: Modern forced air heating. There are no fireplaces remaining.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces south in a small green park in downtown Charlottesville (the highest point in downtown Charlottesville) Directly adjacent to the courthouse is the county office building, next to which is Jackson Park. The general area, known as Court Square, contains a number of late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century buildings.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This class project was undertaken by the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia under the direction of R. Edward Lay, Associate Professor of Architecture, measured and drawn by Jonathan C. Sch... and Matthew T. Lowry, Architecture students, during the Spring Semester 1976.

The documentation was donated to the Historic American Buildings Survey. It was neither produced under HABS supervision, nor edited by members of the HABS staff.